

# Law firm's gamble paying off big

*It wins two \$1 million judgments in one week, believed a first in Va.*

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When your name is Guedri, and the firm you're joining is Allen, Allen, Allen & Allen, you have to be a little apprehensive about how you'll be received.

But the insurance defense firm for which P. Christopher Guedri had worked for eight years imploded in 1990, and the state's largest personal-injury firm needed an experienced trial lawyer.

The firm knew that Guedri had worked as a plaintiffs' attorney for three years before joining the defense firm and that he had continued to represent plaintiffs in the relatively rare cases in which the defense firm did not have a conflict.

"He did have to be reclaimed from the dark side," W. Coleman Allen Jr., president of Allen and Allen, said with a chuckle. "But we regard him as one of our more successful reclamation projects."

Guedri said the firm quickly allayed any uneasiness he had about being an outsider in a practice in which almost half the partners are descendants of its founder, George E. Allen.

"They in every respect have treated me like I'm one of them from day one, and I'm forever indebted to them," he said.

Guedri promptly made a substantial down payment on that debt. Within six months of joining the firm, he won the largest jury verdict in the firm's history, \$950,000, for a woman who suffered serious leg injuries when she slipped and fell in an icy North Richmond parking lot.

That case gave him instant credibility with the firm, Guedri recalled. "From that point on, I was given more and more responsibility for some of the firm's larger cases, and that has continued right on up to the present time."

Just last month, he had the distinction, believed to be unique in Virginia, of helping win two million-dollar jury verdicts in a week.

In the first, a three-day trial ended with a \$2 million award for a man who incurred \$185,000 in medical bills after the car in which he was a passenger ran into the rear of a tractor-trailer on U.S. 460 in Prince George County. Guedri and a partner, Elizabeth M. Allen, successfully contended that the truck driver was negligent because he had stopped his vehicle at midnight in the left westbound lane to investigate something that had hit a side window of the rig.

In the second case, tried three days later with associate J. David Douthit, a car rear-ended by another tractor-trailer crossed the median on U.S. 1 south of Ashland and crashed almost head-on into a car driven by Guedri's client. The trucking company admitted it was at fault, and the jury returned a \$1 million verdict after hearing testimony that the client, a self-employed painter, had significant injuries, including damage to a knee that required its reconstruction.

Guedri made the closing arguments in both cases, and a frequent adversary, Stanley P. Wellman, said Guedri has a well-earned reputation for persuading juries to return large verdicts.

"He somehow seems to pump them up without seeming greedy or overreaching in any way," said another insurance defense attorney, Henry S. Carter, who has tried many cases against Guedri. "He never overplays his hand."

Wellman said, "I've heard many lawyers say, 'If it's a million-dollar case with Lawyer X, it can be a \$2 million case with Guedri, if you go try it with him.'"

For that reason, defense lawyers are anxious to reach settlements with Guedri, even though "he's very aggressive on his evaluations" of even relatively small cases, Wellman said.

"There are dozens of stories of him walking away from an offer of \$15,000 when he thought it was worth \$20,000, and he got \$60,000 or \$80,000" from a jury, Wellman added.

Being willing to try those cases is a key to his success, Guedri said. "If I had any advice for younger lawyers getting into this business, it would be to go ahead and try cases and get good results.

"It's the good results in the trial of cases that will give you the confidence to try more cases and help establish the reputation that will cause defense lawyers and insurance carriers to pay you maybe what they wouldn't pay someone else who doesn't have a proven track record," he said.

That confidence does not extend to arrogance, Coleman Allen said. When Guedri wins a big case, "he's going to cite a special client that he had an opportunity to represent and the fact that he had a strong case and that fact that he was fortunate in having a jury that truly understood the measure of the plaintiff's loss," Allen said.

"You are never going to find him hinting or suggesting that his abilities had anything to do with it. Yet, while he has been fortunate . . . the clients in all those cases were different. The consistent factor was Chris's involvement."

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